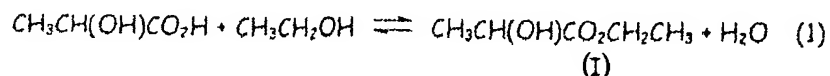


WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A continuous process for the preparation of ethyl lactate (I) by esterification of lactic acid [or
5 of a lactic acid composition] using ethanol, according to the reaction (1):



which consists in reacting said lactic acid with ethanol according to an ethanol/lactic acid
10 initial molar ratio at least equal to 2.5, in the presence of a catalyst, at reflux of the reaction medium, which lies at approximately 100°C, and under an absolute pressure ranging from 1.5 to 3 bar and preferably ranging from 1.5 to 1.8 bar;
15 said process being characterized in that a water/ethanol gas mixture close to the azeotrope is continuously extracted from the esterification reaction medium, in that this gas mixture is then dehydrated directly using molecular sieves, in
20 that an ethanol gas stream, which can be recycled to the esterification reaction medium, and a stream composed of water and of ethanol are then recovered from said dehydration, which stream composed of water and of ethanol is subjected to a
25 distillation, from which water and a water/ethanol azeotrope are obtained, which water/ethanol azeotrope is injected at the top of the column for the distillation of the gas mixture extracted from the esterification reaction medium, and in that
30 crude ethyl lactate is then continuously extracted, which crude ethyl lactate is subjected to purification, from which an ethyl lactate of high purity and heavy products are obtained.

- 35 2. The process as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that use is made of an ethanol/lactic acid

initial molar ratio ranging from 3 to 4.

3. The process as claimed in claim 1 or 2,
characterized in that, for the dehydration of the
gas mixture extracted from the reaction medium
using molecular sieve, the PSA (Pressure Swing
Adsorption) technique is used.
4. The process as claimed in claim 3, characterized
in that the selective adsorption of water, by
passing, at a pressure identical to that applied
to the esterification reaction medium, the water/
ethanol mixture close to the azeotrope in the gas
form through a bed of molecular sieve, and then
the desorption of the water adsorbed beforehand,
by lowering the pressure below 300 mbar and
preferably below 100 mbar, are carried out
alternately.
5. The process as claimed in claim 1, characterized
in that the heavy products resulting from the
purification of the ethyl lactate are recycled in
the esterification reaction medium.